Collaborative scholarship, bringing together religious leaders, believers, and those who are simply curious, in a shared enterprise of enlightened learning.

Quarterly Newsletter

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From the Desk of the Executive Director

This summer saw a sad chapter unfold in the story of "the Ossuary of James." Events disappointed not only those who had hoped this artifact might be authenticated, but everyone who wants to see public scholarship in the field of religion pursued at an appropriate standard.

Because the owner of the ossuary never specified where it was discovered and how precisely he acquired it, the possibility of forgery could not be excluded when the publicity campaign on behalf of the inscription's authenticity was launched last autumn. The Biblical Archaeology Society and several prominent scholars, some of them expert in epigraphy and some not, tried to talk their way around this problem. Their enthusiasm got to the point, as I have mentioned in this column, that a few of them tried to deny that there were inconsistencies in the style of the inscription, that the patina on the ossuary seemed thick, and that for a Christian ossuary to call James "the brother of Jesus" and not "brother of the Lord Jesus" seemed odd. But the principal problem remained that any object whose provenance is unknown can't be authenticated. The damage to the ossuary inflicted on route between Israel and the Royal Ontario Museum did nothing to encourage confidence in the professionalism of those concerned. Still, advocates of the ossuary enjoyed prominent media coverage. Perhaps that made them incautious in their judgments.

In any case, an investigating panel of the Israel Antiquities Authority reported in June that the patina inside the inscription itself did not correspond to the patina around the inscription. In effect, it appeared that the lattering had been cut through the weathering of the stone. In July the owner was arrested for fraud. Under the legal powers of the Israel Antiquities Authority, his residence and storage facility had been searched, and several ossuaries were discovered, as well as equipment for engraving, stamps of ancient letter, and dirt from excavations. In a bizarre twist, the "Ossuary of James" was found on a plank atop a toilet. One headline writer could not resist referring to its being "defecated.

The story of this piece as told by its owner and its apologists has been baroque since the first day. Now it has become sordid. There is no more reason to prejudge a legal matter than there was to prejudge the question of authenticity before the necessary data were in. But for the time being, the "Ossuary of James" can no more feature in discussion of the New Testament than the Piltdown Man can be cited in a course on human evolution.

The arrest of the owner was reported at the time by the Associated Press, but the popular media in this country— the same media that beat the drum for the authenticity of the piece— mostly let the story pass. How convenient for them. Their newfound reticence permits them to evade the issue of their own credibility in being taken over by a publicity campaign.

Major organizations for reporting news have left a huge misconception in the minds of the majority of their readers and viewers. Would they do the same if a politician they had backed was shown to have lied about his qualifications? Why is it acceptable to let suspect information stand in regard to religion, but not politics? This is where I am especially disappointed: the fourth estate still tends to treat religion as a matter of whatever people feel like believing.

In this, journalists understand neither religion nor their own function. A story that is not followed up is just gossip, not news, and unsubstantiated rumor is the stuff of superstition, not faith. Until we can speak about religion openly, clearly, and on the basis of specifiable and specified evidence, our culture will remain at an immature stage where it concerns dealing with impulses and actions that derive from faith.

Because that is the case, I am disappointed most of all by the silence of religious organizations and of professional societies dedicated to the study of the New Testament. Could they find no words to protect the ethical and scholarly and journalistic sloppiness involved in this fiasco? The Society of Biblical Literature sponsored discussions about the ossuary that claimed its authenticity, but never took a stand. The Royal Ontario Museum has prevaricated over the findings of the Israel Antiquities Authority, evidently embarrassed by its own haste in the embroiling the promptness of the piece. Only the Antiquities Authority seems to have done its job.

Just after the arrest of the owner, I was dining in Cologne at a conference of the Studium Novi Testamenti Societatis, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Cologne. During his speech before dinner, the Archbishop mentioned that the medieval cathedral had been dedicated to house the remains of the three wise men of Matthew's Gospel. In his formal reply, the president of our society, not normally known to joke a great deal, observed that, while many of our members might dispute the identity of the bones in the cathedral, at least they had a better claim to authenticity than "the Ossuary of James."

It is good when scholars can laugh a controversy into a healthy perspective, but I hope to see a time when that is not the preserve of scholars alone. One function of the Institute of Advanced Theology is to enable all those interested in mining the sources of religion to distinguish fool's gold from the real thing. Then we will all have the last laugh.

Bruce Chilton
Executive Director

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A Chat with the Chair

From the beginning, from the very first day of organization, our objective for the Institute was the dissemination of truth, honesty, and accuracy. It was, and is our constant goal to research and publish realities as we, and our associates, unfold the historical facts about Biblical events in the First Century.

This is not always easy, as this area of history is layered over by the work of so many hands and minds, who often have their own versions, complete with alterations and bias, of the facts. In history, not only do the “spoils” belong to the victors, but also the franchise to write about it. Truths are often like archaeological finds—buried deep and needing experts to unearth and restore them to their original basis.

One has to be knowledgeable and bold, even brave, to be willing to strip back the imposed layers of historical deceit to get to the truth. This is what Bruce Chilton’s various luncheon lecture series are all about. Often someone will raise their hand during the discussion, after the lecture and say, “That’s not what I was taught.” Bruce explains further and the audience sees, as through a more powerful lens, why he is right.

Do not miss the luncheon lecture series, which will appear this year on different days and under different labels. They all bear a common thread. If First Century history and accuracy are important to you, be there.

Frank Crohn
Chairman of the Board

News of the Institute

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BRUCE CHILTON

In the fall, Rev. Chilton will be giving a series of lectures on Monday evenings in October at the House of the Redeemer in Manhattan. The weekly lectures will be given from October 6 through 27. A fee is required. For further information contact the House of the Redeemer at 212-289-0399; e-mail: info@houseoftheredeemer.org, or visit the website houseoftheredeemer.org. Address: 7 East 95th St., New York, NY 10128.

SENIOR FELLOW, JACOB NEUSNER


A Member’s View

The Institute would like to thank Ms. Hayes, a charter member of the Institute, who wrote the following essay for fellow members.

If you are interested in submitting an essay, please e-mail kate@ihr.org or call the office at 845-587-2789.

ST. PAUL, THE MYSTERY MAN OF CHRISTENDOM

After two thousand years, how can it be that one person can evoke such heated and divergent discussion, not only by the laity who are taught to revere his words, but by theologians, clergy, the scholars of Christian history? The answer is in Paul himself. What he did and said was secondary to what he became.

His mission and writings reveal a man radically driven to find his spiritual identity. One has to put oneself in his place to know the pressures under which he evolved. At best, it would be a limited and superficial knowing. But by grace alone, something happened beyond Paul’s intellectual experience. He found the Cosmic Christ. The spiritual search that drove him so hard opened in him a level of unity with the Divine. He did not think himself there; it was the fruit of what he experienced. For Paul, his thirst for Jesus was so powerful that it brought out a new entity: “I am new in Christ” sounds very much like Paul talking.

For any one of us who has tried to understand Paul, the teachings of Dr. Bruce Chilton have been remarkable. It is said that a good teacher sets you free. To be freed of the misunderstandings resulting from the many levels of Paul has been a true gift. In the lecture/luncheon series on St. Paul, which culminated last spring with a final luncheon meeting in June, Dr. Chilton drew with verve on historical fact. But like Paul, it is Chilton’s spiritual insight that brings us into the new Paul, the one who translated Jesus of Nazareth into the Cosmic Christ, teachings that advanced well beyond that of the other early followers. Paul the outsider of all the groups entitling Jesus’s teachings, came forth with the plum. Without question, Paul is known to have taught that it is not by works but by faith (the inner experience) alone that we are saved. We could deduce the simple instruction here—spiritual hunger expands the soul, preparing it for the presence of the Divine.

Dr. Chilton has done an important work not to be lost by hearing alone. His new book forthcoming in 2004, entitled Rabbi Paul: An Intellectual Biography, is the essence of this teaching.

—Marguerite Hayes, Red Hook
About the Fall Institute Events

SEPTEMBER 23, TUESDAY

LECTURE: THE VISION OF THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

A talk by renowned author Andrew Harvey. Free and open to the public. Bertelsmann Campus Center, Weis Cinema, 6:30 p.m.

OCTOBER 3, THROUGH OCTOBER 31, FRIDAYS

FALL LUNcheon LECTURE SERIES

Free Friday luncheon lectures by the Rev. Dr. Bruce Chilton on the topic of "Mary Magdalene: A Feminist Biography."

Throughout the history of the interpretation of the New Testament, Mary Magdalene has emerged as a pivotal figure in the discussion of gender and sexuality," states Dr. Chilton. "During the 16th century, for example, Protestants and Catholics disputed her place in the Gospels as much as they did basic doctrines of the faith. She makes the connection of femininity and faith unavoidable, because she was the companion of Jesus, a principal witness of his resurrection and what it meant, and one of whose remembrance of Jesus shaped the Gospel tradition."

He continues, "During the autumn lecture series, we will consider those historical issues, but also the broader question of how historical findings can be integrated and applied. Because the literature of Gnosticism endowed Mary Magdalene as a key exponent of Jesus' entire perspective, the new understanding broadening an historical figure is not only a matter of data, but also of hermeneutics. A discussion led by members of the Red Hook Ministerium will follow each lecture.

Pre-registration and payment requested. $12 for each lecture, or $8 each for members of the Institute. Multipurpose Room, Bertelsmann Campus Center, 12 noon. For information or reservations, call the Institute office at 845-758-7279, email iat@bard.edu, or visit www.bard.edu/iat.

OCTOBER 4, SATURDAY

SYMPOSIUM: MIRACLES IN THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS

The featured speaker is Kenneth L. Woodward, contributing editor of Newsweek and author of The Book of Miracles. The Meaning of the Miracle Stories in Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. And Making Sense of How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why. Panelists include Bard professors the Rev. Dr. Bruce Chilton (Christianity), Richard Davis (Hinduism), Jacob Neusner (Judaism), Nusret Rustemoglu (Islam), and Kristin Schiablo (Buddhism).

Multipurpose room, Bertelsmann Campus Center, 3:00 p.m. Free and open to the public, no reservations necessary.

"Opinion polls tell us that 84 percent of adult Americans not only believe God works miracles, but 48 percent claim they have witnessed a miracle in their own lives or in the lives of someone they know," says Woodward. "But what is a miracle and how do we know when a miracle occurs? These are questions polls do not answer."

Every religious tradition contains miracle workers and miracle stories. Woodward states that "although miracle stories can be found in all five traditions—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism—what counts as a miracle differs within each tradition. It follows that when a miracle occurs, it is recognized as such because it replicates the classic miracle stories as found in the sacred texts, and in the stories of the great saints, sages, and spiritual masters recognized by each tradition. Conversely, I would argue, miracle stories in one tradition are usually not accepted as such by members of other religious traditions. In this respect, miracle stories resemble family secrets or family photo albums—things meant to be shared, appreciated and understood only among those within the community. In most interfaith dialogues, therefore, miracle stories are excluded."

Each of the panelists will relate what he or she regards as paradigmatic miracle stories from his or her tradition by way of elucidating the meaning and function of miracles within each tradition. They also will consider the extent to which the integrity and coherence of each tradition depends upon the belief in miracles, at least in the classic miracle stories.

"The aim of the symposium," says Woodward, "is to show how miracle stories reveal a worldview particular to a given tradition. This would be, I believe, the first time the question of miracles and their meanings has been addressed at an interreligious forum."

DECEMBER 9, TUESDAY

LECTURE: MAKING TIME HOLY IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

A talk by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, Weis Cinema, 6:30 p.m.

DECEMBER 13, SATURDAY

MEDIA WORKSHOP

Workshop on mediating in the Christian tradition led by Bruce Chilton. For members only, limited space. Reservations required. Call 845-758-7279, email iat@bard.edu, or visit www.bard.edu/iat.

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SYMPOSIUM: **Miracles in the World’s Religions** on October 4, at 3:00 p.m.

**Featured Speaker:** Kenneth L. Woodward, Contributing Editor of *Newsweek*

The aim of the symposium is to elucidate how miracle stories reveal a worldview particular to a given religious tradition.

Kenneth L. Woodward is a contributing editor of *Newsweek*, where he was the religion editor for thirty-eight years. His articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Smithsonian*, *Commonweal*, *The Nation*, and *America*, among other publications. He is also the winner of a National Magazine Award and the author of *The Book of Miracles* and *Makers of Saints* (both published by Simon and Schuster).

Panelists include Bard professors the Bruce Chilton (Christianity), Richard Davis (Hinduism), Jacob Neusner (Judaism), Nerina Rustomji (Islam), and Kristin Schieble (Buddhism).

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**Institute of Advanced Theology**

Bard College
PO Box 5000
Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504

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For further information on events or membership opportunities, contact the Institute Office at 845-758-2799, email iam@bard.edu, or visit the website www.bard.edu/iat.

Video and audio recordings of Institute lectures and events are available from The Services of Red Hook. For further information, visit www.desservices.org/shilton.htm, email sales@desservices.org, or call 845-758-1591.